

Book Review of *Bloodbath Nation*

JIN Hui, ZHANG Shengting

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Published in January 2023, illustrated by photographer Spencer Ostrander, *Bloodbath Nation* is the latest non-fiction work by Paul Auster. This paper makes a review of *Bloodbath Nation*, including its structure, content, author's writing style and features of cover and illustrations, and gives a brief evaluation of this work.

Keywords: *Bloodbath Nation*, Paul Auster, Spencer Ostrander, American gun issue

Bloodbath Nation, written by Paul Auster (1947-), is an essay on American gun issue and policies, Published by Grove Press in January 2023, this 160-page book features illustrations by renowned photographer Spencer Ostrander.

Paul Auster is a Jewish-American writer who has written many novels, essays, poems, and films since his masterpiece *The New York Trilogy* published. His published works is also presented on the first page of *Bloodbath Nation*. In the eyes of critics, Auster's works showed a variety of experimental features and postmodernity, which led the critics to label Auster as a postmodern writer. However, with the publication of more and more works of Auster, we find that the postmodern elements in Auster's works are gradually eliminated, while the features of realism are increasingly obvious. In *4321*, published in 2017, Auster took a very great length to describe the social and historical events of the 1960s in the United States. Unlike many of his previous essays and autobiographies, *Bloodbath Nation* is Auster's first book-length discussion of a certain social issue. It also shows us that Auster, as he approaches the age of eighty, is still trying his hand at writing on different subjects, rather than just writing in familiar territory.

Spencer Ostrander (1984-) is an emerging photographer from New York City who has shot covers for many prestigious magazines. As Auster says in author's note: Ostrander spent two years photographing the scenes of more than three dozen shootings in recent years. "The pictures are notable for the absence of human figures in them and the fact that no gun or even the suggestion of a gun is anywhere in sight" (Auster & Ostrander, 2023). Photographs are attached to each chapter.

The cover design is simple but eye-catching. The title of the book is written in bold black letters on a white background, and the author's and photographer's names are in red letters. The following paragraph, about the annual number of gun deaths and injuries in the United States, is from the first paragraph of Chapter 3 and is printed from cover to back.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, based on Auster's own childhood experience, analyzes the social and family factors of American gun issue. In the second chapter, Auster tells the story of

Lamar and Billy, two men he knew when he was a sailor, who played important roles in Auster's gun education in different ways. The chapter concludes with the question: what makes us the most violent country in the western world? In Chapter 3, Auster tried to answer the question raised at the end of Chapter 2. He starts with complex historical reasons and compares the control policies of guns and cars in the United States, and believes that the country's unfazed control of guns is due to the governing style that combines fear and violence since the colonial period. If the problem is to be resolved, it will require painful soul-searching by American people. Chapter 4, from the interview with Auster's friend Frank Huyler, shows us the age and gender distribution and the reasons of the shooters in mass shootings. The reasons why these shooters carry out mass shootings are mainly psychological factors and social reasons, among which the pathological psychology of loneliness and hatred against races and religions become the main factors leading to mass shootings. In the fifth chapter, Auster combed through the attitudes of the Black Panther Party to the current government towards gun control and the underlying reasons. The author argues that Americans have not faced up to history and cannot admit their mistakes like Germans. The gun-control force and anti-gun-control force have different philosophical origins so they are unable to engage in meaningful conversation. New measures would be blocked by Republicans, and the government would not be able to enforce the old rules. Finally, Auster expressed unsureness about the future of gun control in the United States.

In terms of illustrations, photos at the end of each chapter are scenes of shootings in recent years. The first chapter mainly includes factories, government departments, supermarkets and other workplaces; the second chapter includes the schools and colleges. The third chapter presents roads, houses, shops, etc., and the fourth chapter mainly shows churches. The photos in the fifth chapter are about the bar and other entertainment places.

From this book, we can know that in the United States, TV programs and movies depict heroes with guns. Shoot-outs and car chases are essential elements in the portrayal of heroes in film and television programs. This leads to children having fantasies about gun ownership from an early age. Since the founding of the United States, the conquest and rule of the indigenous people, slavery, racial and religious issues and other social issues, lead hatred and loneliness become the main psychological factors of the shooting. Auster tells the story of his grandmother murdered his grandfather by gun, which traumatized both his uncle and his father. Because of his own experience, Auster called attention to the victims of the shootings (both physically and mentally), believing that the lack of the father's love also ruined his father's life. Guns not only take the lives of some people, but they can also cause psychological distress and mental illness to those who experience it. Guns also would be traumatic for countless families. The purpose of this book is to analyze the deep-seated causes of the gun issue in the United States, and call on the government and public to pay attention to this issue and solve it as soon as possible.

Conclusion

To researchers who study on Paul Auster, *Bloodbath Nation* is very different from Auster's previous works which are self-focused, mostly autobiographical, including small stories and inner monologues that happen around him. This work explores a serious social issue from the perspective of American social and history as a whole. After 9/11, Auster's works began to change from an obvious postmodern style to realism, and the author paid more attention to the problems existing in society, turning from experimental writing to social analysis writing. The transformation of the style and subjects in Auster's writing deserves the attention of

all Auster's researchers. At the beginning, *Bloodbath Nation* will make readers feel that it is still another autobiography of Auster. However, starting from the third chapter, the author analyzes and combs the causes of the gun issue and interprets the policies, which are logical, coherent and convincing, and arouses readers' deep sympathy for the victims and their families, as well as the attention to the gun issue and the concern about the future of America. All in all, this book is worthy to read for researchers studying both on Paul Auster and American social issues.

Reference

Auster, P., & Ostrander, S. (2023). *Bloodbath nation*. New York: Grove Press.